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The Mexican Question

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The Mexican Question

The Mexican question is the most perplexing problem before the United States today. It can be solved neither by war or diplomacy. There are great underlying causes for the awful conditions prevailing at present in Mexico. A strong dictatorship might keep those causes beneath the surface for a time, as it has in the past, but this will only postpone the settlemen of these questions, which must be settled right before revolution permanently disappears from the country. These questions are primarily moral and economic, rather than religious and political. The Mexican does not care so much about the right to vote as he does the right to live. He does not need so much a change in his creed as he needs a change in his morals. The land baron and the priest have continued their unholy alliance from the days of the *Conquistadores* till the present, playing alternately the one into the hands of the other, to keep the people in ignorance, superstition and debt, so that the exploitation, both by *padre* and *amo*, would be sure and easy. Out of this system of exploitation there have grown up a thousand minor evils. The burden has become greater than the people are willing to

bear in these days when enlarged educational advantages, developed in spite of these feudal conditions, have gradually opened the eyes of the ever increasing middle class.

Along with this new industrial and social order, for which the people are fighting (though often in the most unguided way), there must come another thing if Mexico is to become a strong nation, a thing which the people have not yet seen—moral stamina. No scheme for dividing the great landed estates among the people, no enactment of laws for the amelioration of the peon, no amount of free press or suffrage, will solve the question unless there is an instilling of the great moral principles taught in the Sermon on the Mount. As Col. Roosevelt has recently said to the Brazilians: "Character must ever outrank genius and intellect. The State can not prosper unless the average man can take care of himself; and neither can it prosper unless the average man realizes that, in addition to the taking care of himself, he must work with his fellows with good sense and honesty and practical acknowledgment of obligation to the community as a whole for the things that are vital to the interests of the community as a whole."

This viewpoint of life is entirely new to the Mexican. It is not fair to say that he is incapable of appreciating it, for he has never had it presented to him. Clericalism and vested interests have, both by example and precept, taught him the opposite all through the centuries. Foreign capitalists, with their im-

mense concessions, have usually been willing to join in with the system for exploitation. And the inestimable resources of the country, along with its people, have been made to pay tribute down through the years to these privileged classes. And yet we seem to be astounded at the "horrible atrocities, disgraceful to all civilization," witnessed today in Mexico, and cry out in the name of humanity for them to be stopped. It would seem, rather, that we ought to rejoice that the people have finally gathered strength enough to protest against these wrongs.

The revolution, if it accomplishes nothing but draw the attention of the Christian world to Mexico—and how terribly it had neglected her—may be worth while. This neglect even from a financial standpoint has been most unwise for the United States. If we had spent for schools and moral uplift work in Mexico years ago what we have spent in the last three years in trying to enforce neutrality laws and protect our citizens, the civilized world, in all probability, would have been saved all this loss of life and property. But while American capitalists' interest in material Mexico is represented by investments reaching a thousand million dollars, American Christians' interest in her moral welfare is represented by an investment of a trifle over one million dollars. It has long been a common practice, both in our diplomatic and mission service, to send any insistent candidate who was not strong enough for other countries to Mexico. Thou-

sands of our best informed citizens who can give detailed information as to the social, political and religious conditions in India, China and Japan are absolutely ignorant of Mexico.

But certainly there is a better day ahead. Present conditions are compelling us to an interest in Mexico, and Christian forces must realize that the call of Mexico, so long unheeded, must be answered. And it must be answered, not by the preaching of a sectarian theology, but by the application of the Gospel of Christ to the great moral and economic problems which await solution in that beautiful land of sunshine and shadow.

Missionary experts have said that Mexico is a more difficult field than China or India. There are many reasons for this, among which is the fact that the thinking men of Mexico, having become disgusted with the rottenness of the priesthood, have turned from the Roman church and believe that there is no religion for them. They still, however, carry the old prejudice against the Evangelical Christianity which has been instilled in them from early youth. The fact that the work of Protestantism has been carried on largely among the peon or lower classes is an added reason for their not considering it as being worthy of their investigation. Too often, also, has the missionary been interested in making converts to his religious system, rather than setting forth the great social and moral program which Jesus taught

as the secret of all individual and national progress.

In casting about for some way to preach this social gospel, which would show to the Mexican people that the religion of Christ contained the solution for their political, economic, and social problems as well as their spiritual ones—in fact, that they were all most intimately related—we have found in the People's Institute of Piedras Negras not only the chance for this social service to the people, but an opportunity of interesting the leaders of the new Mexico in Protestant missions, and breaking down prejudice, so that our work shall be recognized as one of the great factors in the making of the nation.

The following incidents will show how men have been interested in our religion that would not have become so by the ordinary methods of work such as have been largely used in Mexico by our missions in the past. They are only given here with the hope that they will help us all to realize that our activities and our policies have been entirely too narrow in the past, and that we can, in a way that we have wholly failed to do heretofore, enlist the very best men of the nation in our work by showing them that it is not that of simply changing creeds, but of giving to the nation a gospel of social justice that will cure Mexico's many ills.

When we opened our first little reading room in Piedras Negras, Alfredo Tamayo, a professor of music in that city, had the patronage of

the best families and was organist for the Catholic church. He was the favorite orator in the celebration of patriotic days, of which there are many in Mexico, and, in a word, was the leader of the musical and literary life of the city. His travels in different countries as an opera singer made him a man of exceptionally broad culture. I noticed that he came once in a while to our reading room, but thought little of it, until one day he asked to have a private talk with me. When we were alone together he drew a manuscript from his pocket and said: "You will be astonished to hear, no doubt, what I want to read to you, but it is something that I have been quietly working on for a good while. Many times in my travels I have passed Protestant churches, but it never occurred to me to enter or to take the least interest in them. But when I saw you had opened a reading room here I began to wonder why a church should do such a thing, and I resolved to investigate. Among the books that I found there that interested me greatly was "The History of the Reformation." It led me to become interested in the Portestant movement to such an extent that I began a thorough study of it. And here are the results." He then read me a beautifully written essay on the beginnings of Protestantism in Germany, and its entrance into Mexico, with a dissertation on the superiority of Protestantism over Catholicism. I was astounded to hear details of the Protestant work in Mexico that I had never known before, and found that

he had been in correspondence with our veteran missionary, Don Tomas Westrup, then living, and with the editors of all the mission weeklies which we had on file in the reading room.

"No," he said, when I urged him to accept publicly the Savior, "I believe firmly in your teachings, but as long as my old mother lives I could not come out and declare myself. It would break her heart. But I wanted to tell you for your encouragement that, had it not been for this reading room, I should never have come to know of the simple Gospel, which I treasure in my heart, though I can not publicly accept." Later we have learned that this Nicodemos has at least spoken in the councils of the mighty in favor of good treatment of the Nazarine and His disciples; and, if his faith does not some day become strong enough to make him dare all opposition, as we pray, at least he is working to make it easier for the progress of the simple Gospel in his native land.

Lic. Dumaine, a prominent lawyer, was appointed Federal Judge, with headquarters at Piedras Negras. Being used to move in the best circles of the capital of the republic, he found himself quite lonesome in our modest, little city. So when invited to co-operate in the work of the People's Intsitute he quite readily accepted. He became so interested that he gave practically all his time, outside of office hours, teaching a class in commercial law, giving lectures and using the influence of his prominent position to interest

others in the work. He used to spend hours with me in my library, discussing literature and life-problems. He had never before known anything about our religion, having left the Catholic church because of the immorality of its priesthood, and he took a keen interest in hearing of the simple teachings of Christ and the mission work of our church. While he never openly accepted Christ, yet His teachings influenced the Judge in his decisions in such important cases as the one between China and Mexico over the massacre of the three hundred Chinese in the Madero revolution, where he was the presiding justice; and he has offered to do all in his power to help us in establishing similar institutes in other cities.

Another prominent gentleman, who is known widely in our country, as well as in Mexico, as one of the greatest living authorities on dry farming, Senor Zefarino Dominguez, who is probably doing more than any other single man in Mexico for the development of his people, has given unstinted time to the People's Institute by means of lectures and the installation of apparatus to show the proper selection of seed corn, and other things which have interested greatly the agriculturalists of the community. Senor Dominguez believes that the Mexican problem is not a political but an economic and social one. He believes that the Mexican people will be quiet and industrious when they are given land to cultivate and shown how to do it in the right way. He recognizes in the People's Institute an organ-

ization that will go far in preparing the people for their own economic independence, and, as he associates with us, has come to see more and more the need of the religious element in this development for which he is so earnestly working.

More or less similar stories could be told of such prominent men as General Venustiano Carranza; Senor J. Kim Yuen, Chinese representative to settle the claims of his government for the Torreon massacre; Professor Andres Osuna, one of the most prominent educators of the country; Senor J. Sa Pereyra, special envoy of Brazil to Mexico; governors and ex-governors of the Federal District; Yucatan, Sonora, Sinaloa, a number of whom have gathered their first favorable ideas of Protestant missions from the People's Institute, and can be counted on in the future to be influential friends to our work wherever they may be found. No doubt there would have been added to this list also the name of President Madero, had he lived, for when I was presented to him in the National Palace, a little while before his death, he expressed deep interest in the plan and asked for photographs and details of the work so he might study how best to help us.

Such prominent men as these have been interested in helping the institute because they saw that it was helping, in a practical way, their own people, as the following cases showed them. Here is Jose Flores, a quiet, young fellow, bashful, and with little to attract. He is working in an office at $40 a month. He joins

our English class, and later our debating club, and studies in the life of Christ. In a year's time, because of his English and his general reliability, he is earning $150 as chief clerk in the freight depot. One of Jose's friends, Roque Garza, hears of his promotion and joins the institute. Some time later the railroad superintendent at Monclova wants a chief clerk who is reliable and speaks good English, and Roque is recommended for the place, and is now receiving three times the salary he received before.

The American superintendent of the boiler department of the railroad shops in our city, one of the finest mechanics in the republic, organized a class in practical geometry for us, and a large number of the apprentices in the shops increased their salaries as a result of this study. One of them is working today in the big shops at Houston alongside of the best trained men in the country.

A very dissipated young man, who was particularly devoted to the sport of bull fighting, and spent all his money in riotous living, was so disgusted with himself that he was thinking of committing suicide. He heard of the institute and came to us and said that he would be willing for the director to take him in hand and do anything he wanted to with him, if there was any chance of his amounting to anything. He said that a book he had seen in our library had made him think that possibly there was some way of making his life worth while, but he did not know himself

whether it could be done or not. In a year's time even the lines on the man's face had changed. He has not been to a bull fight since he started to the institute, and has come to occupy a substantial place in the life of the community. When he lost his position, not long ago, on account of the revolution, he went to Texas and, not finding anything else to do, went to work digging coal. One day the manager wanted to give some directions to the Mexican workmen and found that this young man spoke English. He tested him a little bit and took him out of the mine and gave him a splendid position in the office.

Irineo Hernandez is another young man who worked in the railroad shops, but was not satisfied to be only a "hewer of wood and drawer of water." He came to the institute to better himself. He joined a class in life-problems as well as the class in mechanical drawing. He soon came to be absorbed in the things of the Spirit, the marvelous doctrine of the New Life as he found it expounded at the institute. After a few months of study he made the good confession, though with great opposition at home, and was baptized; and, when the ministerial classes were organized in the fall, he signified the desire to study for the ministry. And he has continued that course, though since the revolution began he has been tried as by fire.

The institute has had a large influence on the public school teachers, a majority of those in the city being members. After a series of

lectures we gave on education, which was for them as well as the general public, we were able to arouse the interest of the community in the public schools to such an extent that a series of public meetings were arranged in the municipal theater to bring to the attention of the people the responsibility toward the schools. In a Bible class on life-problems, with a total enrollment of fifteen, five were public school teachers. Last Christmas, for the first time in the history of the schools, one of the ward schools, where all the teachers were taking work in the institute, Christmas was celebrated and the poor remembered, the director of the institute being asked to tell the story of the Christ-child. The Christmas before we led a great united effort in the municipal theater, when all the poor children of the city were entertained and given most substantial reminders of the spirit of the Christ, in the shape of toys, clothing and food. This bid fair to become an annual event, till it was broken up by the fanaticism of the local priest.

This leads me to refer to another incident, which shows that, while meeting with such great encouragement from the progressive people, at the same time we encounter the most tenacious opposition from that source, which through these four centuries has sought to keep the Mexican people in darkness—the Catholic priests.

The lady principal of the private school where most of the leading families sent their children was working as the chief lieutenant

of the parish priest against the institute. This lady wielded such an influence that it was most difficult to get any of the women of the prominent families to come to our meetings. But as the institute grew in popularity, and the reform mayor, elected principally by the men of the institute, began to mention our work in public addresses, the lady in question began to be more friendly. One day she came and asked us to teach an English class in her school. We thought no amount of other work should keep us from accepting this extraordinary offer, so we did. But she soon found her mistake. Her old friend, the priest, called and said he would excommunicate her and the whole school if she allowed me to continue teaching. She went to the mayor with her troubles and he told her to let him handle the matter. I knew nothing of it all till a month later, when I learned that the mayor had written the priest a letter in which he said if the priest didn't quit persecuting a certain foreigner that was doing more for the education of the people than a dozen of his kind he would see by what legal means it could be stopped. The priest publicly denied the whole matter in his pulpit. By the teaching in this school we have been able to get our ideas into the homes of some of the most exclusive families.

Such encouraging things point to the wide influence of the institute in breaking down prejudice against Protestantism and preparing people's hearts to receive the Gospel seed, al-

though the reaping shall be done by other hands than ours. The other day in the Carnegie library at San Antonio I saw three young men who looked like they were Mexicans, and, speaking to them in Spanish, asked them to come to the Mexican Institute just dedicated there. After I had told them a little about the object of the institute, one of them asked me if I was not director of a similiar institute in Piedras Negras. He said he was from Torreon and had often heard of the work of the People's Institute. Both of the other young men, from Zecatecas and Monterrey, respectively, said that they, too, had known of our work. Here were three young men, spoken to by chance, from three widely separated parts of Mexico who had heard of our work at Piedras Negras, and were thus disposed to take immediate advantage of the new institute just opened in San Antonio, modeled after the Piedras Negras work. I was taken to the Mexican consulate to meet a company of gentlemen whom I wished to interest in the same work. Some twenty representative men from different parts of the republic were present, and it turned out that, whereas I had expected to speak to entire strangers, six of those present prophesied great success for the San Antonio institute from what they knew of the work done in Piedras Negras.

The State government of Coahuila officially indorsed this work by voting $100 a month to help in the support of the night school. The governor often visits the school, and says that

twenty-five of these institutes scattered over the country would soon make revolutions an impossibility in Mexico.

What we must try to do for Mexico is to help her realize the basic truth of the idea expressed by James Anthony Froude in the following words:

"Whether a nation be great or little depends entirely on the sort of men and women that it is producing. A nation is a nation that is composed of sound human beings, healthy in body, strong in limb, true in word and deed, brave, sober, temperate, chaste, to whom morals are of more importance than wealth or knowledge, where duty is first and the rights of men are second—where, in short, men grow up and live and work, having in them what our ancestors called the fear of God."

Mexico has never been so ready to receive this truth as she is today. The moral and religious forces of the United States should be ready to go into the country, as soon as peace is secured, with such a force, and with such an enlarged conception of our duty as never before. Young men with these high moral and spiritual visions, equipped to interpret in a practical way the social service side of Christ's gospel, can find no greater field in the whole world, and may feel assured of the co-operation of Mexico's best citizens in this great work.

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214